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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 001312

SIPDIS

STATE FOR ECA DINA POWELL, CMCROUCH
STATE INFO NEA/PPD AFERNANDEZ, RASMITH, DBENZE
STATE INFO R AND NEA/IPA
JERUSALEM PASS ICD CDANIELS, CAIRO FOR AMB RICCIARDONE

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Canon White Stresses Importance of USG Role in Encouraging Religious Leaders' Peace Efforts

REF: A) TEL AVIV 1115
B) 05 TEL AVIV 3338
C) 04 TEL AVIV 1777

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¶11. (U) Summary: The Ambassador met with Canon Andrew White, former Special Representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Middle East, at the Embassy on March 29. White is a founding member, with former Archbishop Lord Carey of Clifton, of the "Foundation for Reconciliation in the Middle East" (FRME), launched in London in June 2005. The foundation works intensively on reconciliation efforts in Iraq and between Israelis and Palestinians. White is currently dividing his time between Iraq and visits to Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders. He stressed the key role of sustained USG involvement in interfaith efforts in Iraq and Israel/Palestine, advocated for a major conference of Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders to be held abroad (possibly Egypt), and solicited the Ambassador's input on expanding contacts with USG officials on interfaith efforts during White's frequent Washington visits. End Summary.

U.S. Lead Essential in Engaging Religious Leaders

¶12. (U) Canon White, accompanied by three FRME staff (Pastor Mahesh Chavda, FRME Trustee; Peter Maki, White's Executive Assistant; and Phillip Rizk, FRME's Gaza-based representative), noted that deepening the level and intensity of contacts and understanding among key Jewish and Muslim leaders from Israel, the West Bank and Gaza is more important than ever. He reviewed his interfaith peace efforts over the last four years with Rabbi Michael Melchior (MK Labor-Meimad), Rabbi David Rosen, American Jewish Committee International Director of Interreligious Relations, and other rabbis involved in the "Alexandria Process," as well as with Islamic clerics in the region such as Sheikh Imad Falouji of Gaza, Sheikhs Talal Sidr and Tamimi in the West Bank, and Grand Imam Tantawi of Al-Azhar University in Cairo (reported in refs B and C). The encounters facilitated by Canon White and others from 2004-2005 led in May 2005 to the establishment in Gaza and in Kfar Qassem, Israel of two new centers for inter-religious understanding and to joint speaking engagements by Jewish and Muslim religious leaders. White reported that Palestinian Authority Chief Negotiator Saeb Erekat has been and continues to be very helpful in encouraging inter-religious contacts. He also praised Rabbi Melchior's engagement, characterizing it as "very significant to our work," and noted the importance of the meetings he held together with Melchior and Erekat.

¶13. (SBU) Fresh from participating briefly in the Seville Interfaith Conference for World Religious Leaders (hosted by a French NGO) and from a series of meetings with political and religious leaders in Gaza, White stressed the need to increase engagement activities between Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders, despite the difficulties. The fact that 18 Gazans, including Sheikh Imad Falouji, attended the Seville conference (with FRME's logistical assistance) and met with Israeli Jewish leaders and other rabbis was extremely significant, he said. He added that because it has been difficult to facilitate travel of Palestinian religious leaders from Gaza and the West Bank into Israel, he is exploring the idea of holding a gathering of these leaders in Cairo, where they had previously met.

¶14. (SBU) Ambassador Jones noted that in a recent meeting with Israeli Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger and Director-General of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel Oded

Wiener, Rabbi Metzger suggested that President Bush convene an international conference of world religious leaders (ref A) in the United States. Canon White responded enthusiastically to the possibility of such a White House initiative, characterizing the prospect as "vital" and "highly strategic." He stressed the importance of having Iraqi religious leaders participate in such an event.

15. (SBU) Speaking of the broader region, White noted that he is a senior advisor to the Iraqi Prime Minister on interfaith issues. He said that although Jordan's Prince Hassan is active in interfaith efforts, Hassan's relations with King Abdullah are not close. Peace initiatives that Hassan has undertaken on interfaith dialogue are viewed negatively and are actually perceived by many as being anti-Iraqi. Prince Ra'ad, on the other hand, described by White as having the "ear of King Abdullah," is undertaking projects deemed more in line with the King's views. Nonetheless, White stressed, in his view, the U.S., and not Jordan, would be the proper host for a serious effort to bring together religious figures from Iraq and to bring together Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders from the Holy Land.

Ambassador Suggests Call on ECA A/S Powell

16. (U) White said that in addition to updating Embassy and Consulate officers during his frequent trips to this area, he maintains contacts with Washington-based officials on a regular basis, particularly State Department, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), and House and Senate figures working on Middle East issues. The Ambassador suggested that White also meet with State Department Public Diplomacy officials, particularly ECA A/S Dina Habib Powell, to explore the PD aspects of his planned interfaith activities and to explore with her and others in the R family the possibility of USG support for a proposed conference of religious leaders in the region and/or in the U.S.

17. (U) White expressed his strong appreciation for the USG support he has enjoyed for FRME's work, including that of Embassy Tel Aviv PD officers, noting that State Department and USIP support had proven essential in his foundation's work. The Quartet, he noted, is taken much less seriously than is the U.S. by key Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders he has worked with. The U.S. role, he said, is critical in providing on-going advice and counsel, and, on occasion, financial support, to sustain the hope of winning religious communities' support for reconciliation efforts.

Results from R Grant on Interfaith Dialogue and Activities

18. (U) Embassy Tel Aviv PD awarded a USD 43,000 grant in September 2004 to White's previous NGO -- the International Centre for Reconciliation (ICR) in Coventry, UK -- using funds R allocated to the Embassy in FY04 for programs on inter-religious dialogue to advance the peace process. MK Melchior's Jerusalem-based NGO, the Mosaica Center for Inter-religious Understanding, was a key implementing partner in that grant. Mosaica produced separate Arabic and Hebrew language brochures containing the positive and hopeful pro-peace and pro-tolerance statements of religious leaders from this area, documenting the religious communities' joint projects for peace, and calling upon others to join in the effort. With State Department funds and funds from USIP, European and other governments and from private sources, White's team has been able to carry out programs in Israel/West Bank and Gaza. These programs bring senior Israeli and Palestinian Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders together for intra- and inter-communal work to advance implementation of the peace and tolerance supporting principles to which they agreed in the "First Alexandria Declaration of Religious Leaders of the Holy Land" in Egypt in January 2002. (See refs B and C and previous.)

JONES